

The ADVENTURES OF DETECTIVE BARNEY

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The Anonymous Letters

BY THIS time Barney Cook was a sleuth of several weeks' experience. Disguised as a newsboy, he had kept watch over a post-box on a street corner until he had succeeded in identifying a blackmailer who was sending threatening letters to a client of the Babbling Bureau. He had peddled chewing gum at a subway entrance in Harlem, on the lookout for a cashier who was leading a double life, and he had located the flat in which the suspect concealed himself. Out at all hours of the night, eating from his pocket and sleeping only when he was off shift, he had enjoyed the life of a street Arab, gloating over his adventures and taking his pay home to his mother, without counting it, as contemptuous as a young genius for the wages of his art.

But he had also to make out daily reports of his hours on duty, the items of his expenses, and those incidents of his day's work that concerned the case on which he was engaged. And no schoolroom compositions could have been more tedious. At first he had been allowed to narrate his report to a stenographer, who put it into shape and typed it for him; later, he was required to write it out, for the stenographer to correct and typewrite; but now he had to type it himself, and retype it when the stenographer had revised his spelling and his punctuation, and then type it again if the office manager edited it—which he invariably did.

No cub reporter was ever more harassed. After hours of exhausting "leg work" he had to hang over his machine till the back of his neck ached, pounding the keys till his stubby fingers were sore. He had to learn to spell. It was evident that he could never learn to punctuate. He had moments when he was as unhappy as if he had been sent back to school.

He was enduring such a moment in the operatives' room on this particular morning when he was called to Babbling's private office by a message on the office phone, and he went as eagerly as if it were the recess bell that had rung.

He found Babbling talking to a client—a heavy-shouldered, black young man, with a remarkable forehead—whom he introduced as Mr. P. P. Harper. "I think I'll put you in his office," Babbling explained, "as an office boy—from what he has told me of the case. Sit down. I want you to hear the details."

Harper was looking Barney over, and he did not notice the slow, significant scrutiny with which Babbling put the boy on his guard.

"Is he a detective?" Harper asked. Babbling said:

"I certainly would not."

"That's what makes him so successful. Tell me, now; your office is in the Broad Street Building?"

"Yes."

"Are you a broker?"

"No; I'm a promoter," Harper answered. "And a financial adviser."

"For whom?"

"Well, chiefly, for the Van Amberg estate."

Babbling turned to Barney, who had seated himself at the left of the desk. "Mr. Harper," he explained, "is being annoyed by anonymous letters. He wants us to find out who's sending them." And again there was evidently concealed, behind his placid spectacles, some private thought which the boy could not decipher.

Harper said: "They don't come to me. To my wife."

"What put the Van Amberg estate in your office?"

"My wife was the only daughter of old Jacob Van Amberg."

"Had he any other children?"

"A son."

"Are you his financial adviser, also?"

"No. He handles his own property."

"And you handle your wife's?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you handle your brother-in-law's, too? Smoke?"

Babbling had taken a box of cigars from a drawer of his desk. Harper selected one mechanically. "My relations with my brother-in-law are not very cordial. Don't you smoke yourself?"

Babbling had closed the box. "No," he said. "That's one of the little pleasures that we detectives have to deny ourselves."

"Why so?"

"For the same reason as circus acrobats. And jugglers. We're frequently in places where the trembling of a hand would arouse suspicion. Tobacco affects the control that a man has over his nerves."

Babbling was putting the box away. He did not appear to notice that Harper's hand shook as he held a match to his cigar. Barney noticed it. He had already noticed

that Babbling's tone of voice was somewhat too innocent.

Harper exhaled the smoke appreciatively. "You keep good cigars for your clients."

"Not altogether for my clients," Babbling explained. "They're strong enough to release the little unconscious movements of the body that indicate when a man's lying. I use them on suspects. Tell me: Are your relations with your brother-in-law such that these letters might be coming?"

"Hardly," Harper put in. "I'm unwilling to think that he"—

"Would you mind telling me about him?"

"No. Certainly not. Confidentially," He glanced at Barney.

Babbling replied to that glance: "Perfectly trustworthy. And not as young as he looks. He got his training in the secret service before he came to me. His father was a government operative. Used to put him through transoms to open doors—and to shadow persons who would've suspected any one older."

He invented it with such easy conviction that Barney almost believed it himself.

"Well," Harper said. "I met Van Amberg first at college. We were . . . very chummy . . . for a while. I met his sister through him. He invited me to visit his home during the Easter holidays."

"And when did you quarrel?"

"When he practically accused me of wanting to marry her for her money."

"You were not wealthy, then?"

"No; and I'm not wealthy now. I was studying medicine when I married, and I gave it up—at her request—to look after the investments, the properties, that were left to her by her father. I've taken a commission out of the estate, but it has never more than paid my expenses."

"So if these anonymous letters to your wife were to succeed in poisoning her mind against you, you'd be ruined financially. Is that the situation?"

Harper looked narrowly at his cigar; it had gone out. "I'm not so much concerned about the financial aspects of it. I've been very happy with my wife, and I'm fond of my boy."

"Have you any of these letters?"

"No. As a matter of fact, she's not aware that I know she's been receiving them."

"And how do you know it?"

"I had felt for some time that there was something wrong. I had to take measures to protect myself."

"I see. Have you noticed anything else—besides the letters?"

"Well, I've had an idea that I was being followed on the street, and I supposed that the person interested in separating us had employed some crooked private detective to work up a case against me."

"I see."

"And I thought that if I could employ you to put men with me, I could have their testimony to refute any that might be manufactured against me."

"Our office," Babbling said, "doesn't handle divorce cases."

"I understand that. This is not a divorce case. I don't want a divorce—or a separation, either. I want to 'prevent it.'"

"Have your wife's suspicions ever had any real grounds?"

"None whatever."

"Or anything that she has misconstrued to be such?"

"Well—once, last winter, I had supper at Rector's with a young lady who is . . . in the confidence of one of our big railroad men. For business reasons I wanted to get a line on something he was doing. That sort of thing, you know, isn't uncommon in Wall Street."

"And your wife learned of it?"

"Through her brother."

"There has never been any dissatisfaction about your handling of the estate?"

"Except on my side. I've tripled the value of her property and made nothing for myself."

"Any auditing?"

"Her brother has had all my statements audited quarterly."

"How old is your son?"

"Six."

"He's your wife's heir?"

"Naturally."

"You did not marry until after her father's death?"

"No."

"Yet you don't think her brother's behind this attempt to separate you?"

"Well, he's hardly that sort."

"What sort is he?"

"He's an inoffensive kind of idler. When I knew him first he used to collect birds, and make water-color drawings of them. He's at the head of a local Audubon society—and mixed up with a society for the preservation of the Palisades and another for abolishing billboards—and all that sort of piffle. He's getting

into politics, I hear, now—as a reformer."

"Married?"

"No."

"You've not separated? She's still living with you?"

"She's been visiting her brother—lately."

"Where?"

"At the old family place—up the Hudson. Our boy's had trouble with his throat. The winters in the city are bad for him."

"You didn't go with them?"

"I'm not on speaking terms with Van Amberg."

"These letters have been received by her there?"

"Yes. . . . As a matter of fact, some of them came to the house here and I redirected them."

"I see. Well, I shall have to make a preliminary investigation before I can decide what line to work on. I can get you by telephone?"

"What sort of preliminary investigation?"

"The usual sort. It seems evident that this is a family affair, in no way connected with your business. And my first plan—of putting an operative in your office—will have to be given up," Babbling rose. "I'll let you hear from me in a day or two."

Harper came to his feet reluctantly. "What are you going to do?"

Babbling looked at him with a benign smile. "I haven't the least idea."

"But I want you to put men with me, at once—for protection."

"You look as if you could take pretty good care of yourself. Where did you get those shoulders? College athletics?"

"Yes—I don't mean that sort of protection. If they have detectives—"

"My dear sir"—Babbling held out his hand—"if there are detectives following you, they'll know that you're in this office now, and they'll be watching for my men. We must be cleverer than that."

"Oh, I see," Harper shook hands with him. "I'll hear from you as soon as possible."

"Don't worry. We'll begin at once. Go out this way."

When the door had closed on him Babbling sat down at his desk again, took off his gold spectacles and settled back meditatively in his chair, tapping with his spectacles upon his teeth. They were small, sharp teeth, set far apart and very white.

"Well," he asked Barney, "what do you make of it?"

Barney had made practically nothing of it.

"Well," Babbling said, "you didn't like him, did you?"

Barney shook his head.

"Why not?"

"I dunno."

Babbling studied him in silence a moment, then he rose. "I'm disappointed in you, Barney," he said, beginning to walk up and down the room. "You've got the makings of a good detective in you, but you don't seem to be developing. When that man came in here I had a distinct impression. Of something strongly sinister. That's why I called you in. I wanted to see whether you got it."

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he didn't. Why do you suppose it shook? He's in almost perfect physical condition. He's been an athlete. And evidently he doesn't dissipate."

I tell him that we detectives don't smoke because we're often in situations where the trembling of a hand would arouse suspicion. Now, if he has come with anything to conceal, he'll immediately become conscious of his hand. And it'll show. Understand?"

Barney nodded, big-eyed.

"When his hand shook, that alarmed him. When I added that the tobacco was strong enough to affect his nervous control of himself he let his cigar go out, didn't he?"

"I didn't notice."

"Well, if you're going to be of any use to this office you'll have to begin to open your eyes. You'll have to learn to know when a man's lying to you and when he is telling you the truth. If you had watched Harper you'd have seen that when I questioned him about those anonymous letters I purposely looked him square in the eye. He at once became uneasily conscious of the facts that were concealed behind his eyes. And his natural impulse was to look away from me. He was able to control that impulse. But in controlling it he overdid it. He stiffened the muscles. His eyes set. That might be an innocent reflex in the case of a suspect who knew he was unjustly suspected. But Harper had no reason to suppose that I suspected him. Why should he? Therefore the idea

of our men to show that the accusations were unjust. Having convinced her that he was the victim of such a conspiracy, he could easily make her believe that she had been deceived about him in the past. And regain her sympathy? Eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. But this man is too big to be playing that sort of game as an end in itself. He's too big. Unless I've lost my eye." He sat down and looked at Barney vacantly.

His face became mildly blank in thought. "At college, studying medicine, he was probably a poor boy, very ambitious. He went in for athletics, and distinguished himself. And attracted Van Amberg, who was evidently aesthetic. Van Amberg's friendship flattered him. They became chummy. Van Amberg talked about him at home, and invited him there. The girl had heard her brother speak of him. She was predisposed. Harper saw his chance and took it. But he would conceal from Van Amberg the fact that he was making love to the sister. And having made sure of the girl, he would be less considerate of the brother. That's where the quarrel would come from. Then when the father's death left the girl her money they married, and Harper gave up medicine. He wanted power. It's in his face. Her money meant power. It meant a career."

"Having got the girl, he shows the other side of him. The marriage isn't happy. The brother has authority enough to keep an eye on Harper's

gave him Harper's card. "This man," he said, "has separated from his wife. He seems to be using some rather questionable means to bring her back to him. I want to find out what he's up to—what his final purpose is. Never mind his office. Get a line on his house. On his servants. On his friends. On his evenings. And, Arch, I want to get telephone connection with a man named Van Amberg—only son of old Jacob—at his place up the Hudson. Right away. You can go, Barney."

Barney went, unwillingly.

A while later Babbling notified him by telephone: "Be at your desk at 3 o'clock this afternoon. I want you to make another appearance in this Harper business."

At ten minutes after 3 he was called to Babbling's private office and introduced to Eugene Van Amberg as "a young man who has been out on the case." And with his morning's lesson in his mind Barney gave all his gaze to Van Amberg and took a good impression of him, demurely.

He was a tall, loose-shouldered man of thirty-five, very dryly tanned, with a philosophic long nose and a thin-lipped mouth. He was well dressed in a negligent manner.

He said to Babbling: "I didn't exactly understand what the case was." And he had a deep, but peculiarly gentle, sort of voice.

Babbling nodded. "No. I couldn't be explicit over the telephone. Sit down."

"What I am going to tell you," Babbling said very slowly, "is, of course, confidential. We have a client who has been blackmailed systematically for some years by a woman and two men in this city. As in the majority of such cases, he is not in a position to prosecute. And we have been investigating the operations of the gang in the hope of finding a victim on whom we might successfully base a prosecution." He reached for a file of typewritten reports on his desk and began to turn the pages.

"In the course of this investigation we obtained evidence to indicate that the blackmailers had either sent, or were preparing to send, letters to a Mrs. P. P. Harper—who, it seems, is your sister. Her address, as they

Blackmail, eh?" Harper said, hoarsely.

of guilt must have come from his own thoughts. Understand?"

Barney said he did.

Babbling was enjoying himself. He paced up and down, like an instructor expounding a beloved art. "Couldn't you see that he was writing—or planning to write—those letters himself?"

"Gee!" Barney said. "What for?"

"Well," Babbling reflected, "if he were a different-looking sort of man I'd say that he merely intended to make his wife believe there was a conspiracy of lies against him. I'd say he was intending to make unjust accusations against himself, anonymously, and then produce the reports

handing of his wife's estate, and Harper resents it. The wife refuses to take his side against her brother. After seven or eight years of bickering Van Amberg is getting the wife away from him. Harper wants her back. But he wants her because he wants control of that estate. Well?"

His gaze focused on Barney. "Is that your idea of the situation?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then what do you think he's up to?"

Barney shook his head.

Babbling said: "I've a notion it'll be interesting to find out." He pressed a call button. When Archibald, his office manager, appeared he

had it in their notebook, was a town address, wasn't it, Barney?"

"Yes, sir," Barney said.

He put aside the report. "We found that she was away from home, visiting you. And I phoned you in order to find out whether the letters received by her were sufficient for our purpose."

"To prosecute on?"

"Yes."

Van Amberg shook his head. "It's out of the question."

"Because the letters were insufficient? Or because Mrs. Harper is averse to?"

"For both reasons. She's been very ill. I've intercepted the letters,